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ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether there is a difference between the attendance rates of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and non-AFDC-supported elementary school children in the Milwaukee public school system. A new proposal calls for expansion of the school attendance requirement, which now requires high school students to attend school regularly or lose their AFDC benefits, to include elementary school students in order to pressure AFDC-supported students to attend school regularly. This study investigates whether the program is needed, and if so, whether it could have a significant effect on attendance behavior. A data base of attendance information, consisting of the entire second to fifth grade elementary school population, was examined to determine whether the attendance rates differ between the two groups. Data indicate that differences in attendance between students from AFDC-supported and non-AFDC-supported families is small. Furthermore, data indicate that the pressure exerted by means of the withholding of AFDC funds could result in only about a 1.8-day potential increase in attendance, and hence it is unlikely that such a program could show a significant impact. Four tables are included. (JS)

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Do School Attendance Rates Vary Between AFDC and Non-AFDC Supported Children?

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The issue of whether Learnfare should be applied to elementary students as well as high school students has recently been raised. The basic assumption behind the high school Learnfare program is that if students are being supported by AFDC because their families cannot currently earn enough to be ineligible, then the next generation should be better equipped to earn a living by attending school regularly. Those high school students whose families are AFDC supported are required to attend school regularly or their families will lose the portion of their AFDC benefits intended to support that particular student.

The new proposal says that the school attendance requirement should be expanded to include elementary school children as well as high school children. The underlying assumption is that AFDC supported children do not attend school as often as non-AFDC supported children and that pressure is needed to raise AFDC-supported children's attendance levels. This paper will explore whether the underlying assumption of differential attendance rates is accurate.

The need to examine elementary student attendance rates creates a problem for both the analysis of the underlying assumption and the implementation of such a program. In a large school system such as that found in Milwaukee, there is no mechanism currently in place to efficiently track the attendance of individual students. All elementary attendance data are kept at the individual schools. None of it is computerized. Only summary data are reported centrally. This means that considerable expense would have to be incurred before the proposed monitoring of AFDC children could occur.

The question this expense raises is, is there really a difference between the attendance rates of AFDC and non-AFDC supported children? If there is no difference, the proposal would seem superfluous because it would be extremely difficult to raise attendance rates just by requiring more monitoring. If there is a difference in attendance, is the difference large enough to justify the expense involved in establishing the monitoring system? These are the questions this paper addresses.

The Urban Research Center has developed a dataset which can be used to answer these questions. That dataset is described in the next section. Following that is a section on our method of analysis and our findings. We finish with our conclusions

The Data

The Urban Research Center, with assistance from the Milwaukee Public Schools, has constructed a unique, longitudinal database containing information on two classes of elementary school children. The database follows two groups of MPS students from kindergarten through fifth grade. One set of students is followed from kindergarten in 1980-81 through fifth grade in 1985-86. The second set is followed from kindergarten in 1981-82 through fifth grade in 1986-87. In total some data are available on over 20,000 students who at some time were enrolled in one of these cohorts in MPS during any one of these seven years.

Under current MPS operating procedure only certain types of information on these students are available centrally at MPS. These data include standardized test scores, eligibility for free or reduced price lunch, participation in AFDC, and the like. Such information is recorded on computer tapes by year and student. Other data such as individual student attendance records, school grades, family status, and the like are available only at the individual schools. URC staff were able to go to the schools and collect historic attendance data on approximately 6,900 students from these two classes. These data were then linked to individual student lunch eligibility and participation in AFDC data which were on

computer tape. The result is a dataset that includes a large number of students over as many as seven years.

This unique dataset allows us to examine the issue of whether the attendance rates are different between students in families which are supported by AFDC and those which are not. Each student record contains whether the student's family was receiving AFDC during each year, how many days of school the student attended each year, whether the student changed schools during each year, and whether the student's family was "low income" as judged by whether the student was eligible for a full or reduced price lunch each year. In each given year complete data are available for between 4,000 and 6,000 students, making any conclusions from the data very well founded.

The data do not include the most recent school years. But given the consistency of the results over many years, there is little reason to believe that patterns of attendance would have changed. We contend that the historical record is a valid measure.

Methodology

The issue of whether AFDC and non-AFDC supported students attend school a similar number of days seems on the surface to be a rather straightforward question. But we have attempted to look at the question from several perspectives in order to reduce the uncertainty some may have with the results produced. We examine not only the average number of days attended by each group, we make a distinction by grade level to see whether patterns change as they get older. We look at students who were in the same school all year as opposed to those who changed schools. We also examine how many students had perfect or near perfect attendance records during each year to determine the degree to which a few days of attendance can vary. And we explore whether it is AFDC or the mere fact of low income which can account for any differences found in attendance between AFDC and non-AFDC supported children.

As discussed above, the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee - Urban Research Center MPS database is comprised of longitudinal data describing two cohorts of MPS students. The two groups began their tenure in kindergarten a year apart, in the 1980-81 and 1981-82 school years. For the purposes of our analysis, no distinction was made between the two groups. In addition, AFDC recipient information was only available for students in grades two through five. Therefore, our study population is comprised of the entire second to fifth grade MPS elementary school population, including both cohorts.

Mean and Median Attendance of Students Grades Two through Five

The following tables present the mean and median days of attendance in addition to the number of students upon which the calculations were based. Table 1 summarizes the yearly mean and median attendance of students from non-AFDC supported families in grades two through five. Table 2 presents similar data for non-AFDC students eligible to receive free or reduced cost school lunches (students who are "low income" but not on AFDC). Finally, Table 3 presents attendance data for AFDC recipient students.

Table 1
Days of School Attended,
All Non-AFDC Recipient Students

	Mean	Median	Cases
Grade 2	168.53	172.00	2,733
Grade 3	168.31	172.00	3,243
Grade 4	168.27	172.00	3,618
Grade 5	169.23	173.00	4,048

Table 2
Days of School Attended,
Non-AFDC Recipients Eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch

	Mean	Median	Cases
Grade 2	166.12	170.00	816
Grade 3	166.22	170.00	1,391
Grade 4	166.03	171.00	1,842
Grade 5	167.28	172.00	2,061

Table 3
Days of School Attended,
All AFDC Recipients

	Mean	Median	Cases
Grade 2	164.68	169.00	1,540
Grade 3	164.82	169.00	1,947
Grade 4	164.29	169.00	2,243
Grade 5	164.81	169.50	2,342

Source: Urban Research Center, UW-Milwaukee, MPS Longitudinal Student Database, 1980-87.

Median as well as mean (or average) attendance values were computed to adjust for the likelihood that a few relatively poor attenders could understate actual student attendance. As expected, median values are consistently higher than mean values for all grades. Regardless of the measure used however, the figures suggest that actual attendance varies only slightly across the non-AFDC, low income non-AFDC, and AFDC groups.

It is evident from the tables above that non-AFDC recipient students have the highest mean and median levels of attendance. Yet, given the standard 180 day school year, the absolute difference of approximately three days in median attendance between AFDC and non-AFDC recipients is very small (1.6%). The attendance of free or reduced cost lunch eligible students whose families do not receive AFDC fall between the values for AFDC and non-AFDC recipients. Mean and median attendance figures for low income non-AFDC recipients are consistently one to two days higher than AFDC recipients, and one to two days lower than non-AFDC recipients. Thus low income does have some influence on attendance.

Many MPS students attend more than one school in a given school year. To insure the validity of student population attendance figures, mean and median values were calculated for three population sub-groups: students attending 90 days or more; students attending only one school in a given year, and, those students attending more than one school and attending 90 days or more in a given school year.

As expected, the sub-groups comprised of students attending the same school and students attending 90 days or more show slightly higher attendance figures than the study population as a whole. Attendance for both sub-groups is approximately one to two days per year higher than the study population figures. Also, as expected, the figures for students attending more than one school per school year are considerably lower than the study population group. Figures for students in this sub-group are consistently eight to ten days lower than study population figures. It is important to note, however, that the difference in attendance figures between non-AFDC recipient, AFDC recipient and low income non-AFDC populations remains consistent whether school mobility or minimum attendance criteria are applied or not. The gap between these groups remains the same.

In order to establish a "baseline" against which to assess the significance of differential AFDC/non-AFDC student attendance, the URC examined the second through fifth grade students with perfect or near-perfect attendance records. Table 4 displays the percentages of students by grade, who managed perfect attendance or near-perfect attendance. Viewed within the entire context of student attendance patterns, it is again apparent that the AFDC/non-AFDC and AFDC/non-AFDC low income attendance differentials are relatively minor. Depending on the grade examined, between 76 and 86 percent of all second through fifth grade students entering the MPS-system during the 1980-81 and 1981-82 school years missed more than 3 days of school. This means that a three day difference in days attended is miniscule, given that more than three-fourths of all students missed at least that many days.

Table 4
Percentage of All Students with Perfect or Near-Perfect Attendance Records

	180	179-80	178-80	177-80
Grade 2	1.3%	4.4%	8.7%	4.0%
Grade 3	2.4%	5.6%	0.6%	6.2%
Grade 4	2.0%	4.8%	10.0%	16.4%
Grade 5	5.4%	11.7%	17.6%	23.9%

Source: Urban Research Center, UW-Milwaukee, MPS Longitudinal Student Database, 1980-87.

In summary, available data indicate that differences in attendance between students from AFDC-supported and non-AFDC supported families is small. For all students in grades two through five only 3 median attendance days, and 3.9 mean attendance days, separate non-AFDC students from AFDC students. And, the data suggest that more than half of this three to four day difference is attributable to income status alone. That is, controlling for the relationship between income and student attendance, only 1.843 fewer mean attendance days can be attributed to AFDC status *per se*. [The above figures are based on a mean attendance of 168.619 days for non-AFDC students, regardless of grade level (N = 13,642); for non-AFDC and Free or Reduced Lunch Eligible students, the mean days

attended was 166.484 (N = 6,671); and AFDC students attended an average 164.641 days (again, for all grades two through five, N = 8,072). Differences in attendance rates controlling for 90+ days/yr. attendance, and for number of schools attended during the school year, are very similar.]

A student's family AFDC status then, is rather weakly related to school attendance. Pressure exerted by means of the withholding of AFDC funds, could "target" only about a 1.8 day potential increase in attendance. Since a Learnfare program directed at improving the primary grade attendance of students from AFDC families would have only a very small "gap" (between AFDC and poor non-AFDC students) upon which it could concentrate its efforts, it is unlikely that such a program could show a significant impact.

Conclusion

Based on the above data, some will conclude that the three day difference in the median number of days attended by AFDC and non-AFDC students is important enough to address, while others will feel it is not. Even if one concluded that increasing attendance among AFDC students by an average of less than two days a year is significant, a relevant question for public policy is the cost effectiveness of such an approach. Although an exact estimate of the costs is not possible, it most likely would require a substantial public expense in a school system as large as Milwaukee's.

If, on the other hand, a 1.6 percent increase looks worth pursuing, then a better use of such monies would be to make the time spent in school more productive by using those resources to enhance education and not to monitor mere attendance. We strongly support the goal of increased learning for both AFDC and non-AFDC students, and feel that resources spent on education rather than monitoring are more likely to move us toward that goal.